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UNCLAS MUMBAI 002369

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MAHARASHTRA MINISTERS TAKE OATH OF OFFICE; YET TO GET PORTFOLIOS

REF: MUMBAI 2286

1. (SBU) On November 9, 2004 Governor Mohammed Fazal administered the oath of office and confidentiality to 15 senior ministers chosen to be part of the Congress/Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) led Democratic Front government of Maharashtra. The new ministers have yet to receive portfolios. Chief Minister (CM) Vilasrao Deshmukh of the Congress Party and Deputy Chief Minister (DCM) R.R. Patil of the NCP told the media that portfolios would be allocated within the next two weeks.

2. (SBU) Last week, NCP legislator Babasaheb Kupekar was elected speaker of the state parliament. He ran unopposed. The opposition coalition of Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Narayan Rane of the Shiv Sena, who had been chief minister of Maharashtra from 1997-1999, as leader of the opposition. Rane had been opposition leader in the outgoing parliament.

3. (SBU) Further ministers are expected to be named in the coming weeks. Competition for cabinet positions was particularly fierce in the wake of a January 2004 law that limits the number of cabinet positions to 15 percent of the number of deputies in a state parliament. As a result, the new government is allowed a maximum of 43 ministerial portfolios as opposed to 67 in the outgoing state government. The NCP is expected to get 24 portfolios and Congress 19 as a result of the two parties' coalition agreement. The jobs of CM and DCM both count against this total, so Congress and NCP will be allocated 18 and 23 portfolios respectively. It is expected that the ministers sworn in on November 9 will receive the most powerful and influential ministries. Most of the remaining cabinet jobs will go to ministers of state and junior ministers.

4. (SBU) The swearing-in ceremony followed intense negotiations between Congress and NCP for the reduced number of minister portfolios. Of the 15 ministers sworn in on November 9, six are members of Congress and nine are NCP members. Congress is set to lose the larger number of minister posts. Over the last week the new CM, Vilasrao Deshmukh made four trips to New Delhi to discuss the cabinet formation with his party's high command. Several portfolios will also have to be allocated to members of the smaller parties and to independents who are members of the coalition. Each party also had to deal with dissatisfied members of their own ranks who were ministers in the previous government but will find themselves without a portfolio in the new, smaller government. Congress and NCP are therefore expected to address the issue of additional ministers gradually and on a case-by-case basis in the coming weeks.

5. (SBU) Of the Congress ministers taking oath, the most prominent were former Industries Minister Patangrao Kadam, former Forests and Environment Minister Surupsinh Naik and former labor minister Satish Chaturvedi. Prominent among 9 NCP ministers sworn in are the two former deputy chief ministers Vijay Sinh Mohite Patil and Chhagan Bhujbal, former finance minister Jayant Patil and former irrigation minister Ajit Pawar, nephew of Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar. The new ministers will not necessarily inherit the portfolios they held in the outgoing government. Naik's portfolio, for example, is expected to go to NCP in the new government.

SIMMONS